

Opening Statement of Donna M. Christensen
Chairwoman, Subcommittee on Insular Affairs
On the Legislative Field Hearing on H.R. 3079
August 15, 2007

Good Morning and Hafa Adai.

It is my honor to welcome everyone to this very historic moment for both the U.S. Congress and the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands.

Today the Subcommittee on Insular Affairs is convening what I believe is the very first Congressional hearing to take place in the CNMI, to hear testimony on H.R. 3079, legislation which I introduced, which would apply U.S. immigration laws to this archipelago and also provide for a non-voting delegate from the CNMI in the U.S. House of Representatives.

Let me first thank the CNMI Supreme Court and Chief Justice Miguel Demapan for so graciously providing a venue to hold this hearing. It is appropriate that as we move forward in this legislative process we can look back and acknowledge that it began not only in the CNMI, but also in a place where justice and equality prevails.

I also wish to thank your Resident Representative Pete Tenorio. He has become a good friend of mine and does a fine job of representing the interests and the people of the CNMI in Washington, D.C.

As a non-member of Congress, with the responsibility of working across the Federal government as well as developing relationships with Members on Capitol Hill, all of us who deal with these issues realize how challenging the job must be for him.

Keeping in mind his constituents and how a change in immigration policy will affect the CNMI, he requested that we come to listen to your leaders and the community

We responded and have made this effort to come to the CNMI because there is no better way to ensure that we achieve what is best for the people of the CNMI and for our nation than for us to be here with you, to see first-hand the challenges you face, and to convene this hearing here in the commonwealth.

I want to welcome the witnesses and thank them for taking the time to present their testimonies, and I want to also welcome those of you in the audience as well as those just outside this venue who are exercising their right to express their positions -- in favor or opposed --- on this legislation and the effort which will be made by Congress to normalize the immigration policy of this U.S. territory by applying U.S. immigration laws and to address the plight of the non-resident workers.

Much has been said about the efforts of this Subcommittee and our counterparts in the U.S. Senate. Questions have been raised about our timing, demonizing the motive for change, and suggesting that this endeavor runs counter to the spirit of the Covenant which brought these islands comprising this archipelago from trust territory into the American family.

The CNMI has had two decades of local control over immigration policy. For the future prosperity of the CNMI and for the security of our nation, I believe the path should now lead in a different direction.

Let us be clear, concern over the exercise of immigration policy in the CNMI is not new. It spans four U.S. Presidents and nearly twenty years. It began under the Reagan Administration when, in May 1986, then-Assistant Secretary Richard Montoya began his letter to former CNMI Governor Pedro P. Tenorio; ***“The recent news reports on the tremendous growth of alien labor in the Northern Mariana Islands are extremely disturbing.”***

At that time, there were 6,600 non-resident guest workers let in by the CNMI government. For comparison, Montoya noted that Guam’s alien labor population – which was federally administered – was only at 1,200.

Mr. Montoya continued with expressions of concern and forecasted that the ***“uncontrolled influx of alien workers***

in many segments of the NMI economy can only result in increased social and cultural problems.”

The warnings continued through the Administrations of Bush I, Clinton, and currently in President George W. Bush’s term, where we already know that the Administration has expressed their support for extending U.S. immigration laws; once in 2001 in a letter from the Department of Justice to Senator Frank Murkowski and the other in testimony presented to the Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee during a hearing on S. 1634 whose language is identical to Title I of H.R. 3079.

The people of the CNMI and those non-residents brought here, at times under false pretences, deserve better. I believe that normalizing the immigration policy does just that and provides a better environment for residents and all they hope of their island -- a strong economy, opportunities for themselves and their children, good paying jobs, reliable infrastructure, strong schools and adequate healthcare. This is the American way, and we are Americans.

And as Americans you should have representation in the U.s. Congress. With the proposed changes that H.R. 3079 would enact if passed, having a CNMI Delegate to Congress will be critical to ensuring that your voices continue to be heard and your interests considered as the implementation unfolds.

I have always strongly supported the CNMI having a non-voting delegate in the U.S. House of Representatives and am committed to ending this injustice to the people of the Commonwealth.

Again thank everyone who has taken the time to reach out to us, to meet with us and to be here today. Thank all of the people of the CNMI for their warm hospitality.

I look forward to the testimony that will be provided to us.